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ICE-LED TASK FORCE SEIZES IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES, LARGE CACHES OF FIREARMS, SILENCERS IN SOUTH TEXAS *-Arrests & Seizures by Border Enforcement Security Task Force Aim to Reduce Violence in Laredo Area -*

SAN ANTONIO – Julie L. Myers, Assistant Secretary of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), today announced that, in three recent enforcement actions, authorities assigned to the Department of Homeland Security’s Border Enforcement Security Task Force (BEST) in Laredo, Texas, have seized materials for 33 Improvised Explosive Devices, grenade components, large quantities of assault weapons, rifles, silencers, machine gun assembly kits, bullet-proof vests, police scanners, narcotics and cash.

On January 27, 2006, BEST task force officers from ICE, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), FBI, and the Laredo Police Department executed a search warrant at a location in Laredo. The search revealed two completed Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and materials for making approximately 33 more IEDs. Agents found 300 primers, 1,280 rounds of ammunition, 5 grenade shells, 9 pipes with end caps, 26 grenade triggers (14 with fuses and primers attached), 31 grenade spoons, 40 grenade pins, 19 black powder casings, as well as 65 firearm magazines, a silencer, and other firearms components.

The day before the seizure of the IEDs, members of the BEST task force arrested an accused weapons dealer/manufacturer in Laredo and found a weapons cache at his home. On January 26, 2006, agents arrested the 30-year-old man for federal firearms violations after he allegedly sold a fully-automatic AK-47 assault rifle and cocaine to an undercover ICE agent. A search of his home revealed 6 kits to assemble fully-automatic weapons and at least 20 assembled firearms, including AK-47 and AR-15 assault rifles, pistols and rifles. Agents also found 26 firearm magazines, 2 silencers, 2 bullet-proof vests, sniper scopes, police scanners, pin-hole cameras, 2,600 rounds of ammunition, quantities of cocaine, methamphetamine and cash.

On January 12, 2006, BEST team members arrested another Laredo resident after executing a search warrant on his home where they found firearms and narcotics. Agents seized roughly 400 pounds of marijuana, two AK-47 assault weapons, two Uzi assault weapons, a silencer, and approximately \$5,000.

“Keeping explosives and other high-powered weaponry out of the hands of violent criminal organizations is a central focus of the new Border Enforcement Security Task Force in Laredo. As these seizures and arrests demonstrate, ICE is working day-and-night with its task force partners to stem the tide of violence that has been ravaging border communities in South Texas in recent months,” said ICE Assistant Secretary Myers.

Formerly known as “Operation Black Jack,” BEST is a Homeland Security-led, intelligence-driven task force that was created in Laredo in July 2005. Officers from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies are

collocated in the task force to share information and target the leadership and supporting infrastructure of violent criminal organizations operating in the Laredo/Nuevo Laredo area.

Since its inception, BEST has arrested 28 individuals and seized 36 assault rifles, 10 handguns, 5 silencers, a large quantity of weapons components, kits, and ammunition, as well as roughly 700 pounds of marijuana, 336 pounds of cocaine, 1.5 pounds of methamphetamine and roughly \$1.14 million.

The BEST in Laredo is comprised of agents and officers from ICE, ATF, Customs and Border Protection, Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Marshals Service, Texas Department of Public Safety, Laredo Police Department, and other state and local law enforcement agencies. The United States Attorney's Office and the District Attorney's Office provide significant support to BEST.

Some other recent enforcement actions by the task force include the following:

- On October 27, 2005, BEST team members traveled to Rockwall, Texas, after receiving information that two subjects wanted for murder in Laredo lived there. A search of a residence resulted in the arrest of the two subjects wanted for drug-related murders that occurred as far back as 2003. During the search, agents also encountered four additional subjects that were arrested for various crimes. Two subjects were arrested for entering the country without inspection. One was also a person of interest in a 2003 murder in Laredo. Another subject was a fugitive from the U.S. Marshals Service. Another, the occupant of the residence, was arrested for possession of cocaine and marijuana. The search also resulted in the seizure of \$132,991, a handgun, money counter, and scales.
- On October 11, 2005, BEST team members received information about a residence in Laredo where a homicide suspect might be located. The information was shared with the Laredo Police Department who investigated. The next day the Laredo Police Department contacted BEST when the investigation revealed that the homicide suspect was not located there, but \$342,880 in currency and 10 fully-automatic AK-47s weapons had been discovered. The BEST investigation has revealed that the occupant at the home was guarding the weapons and currency prior to them being smuggled to Mexico and that he was working for a cell operating on behalf of reputed Mexican drug kingpin Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman. Much of the violence in the Nuevo Laredo area is caused by competition between the remnants of Mexico's Gulf Cartel which is supervised by Osiel Cardenas Guillen, and Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman Loera and Arturo Beltran Leyva, who are members of the "Federation" that is attempting to take control of this important smuggling "Plaza."

Last month, the Department of Homeland Security announced that several new BEST task forces would be created along the border based on the Laredo BEST model. The new task forces will focus on every element of the enforcement process, from interdiction to prosecution and removal, with the goal of eliminating the top leadership and supporting infrastructures that sustain cross-border criminal organizations.

The next BEST will be stood up in Arizona, after Homeland Security conducts a threat assessment of that area. Homeland Security will conduct similar assessments as it moves forward in establishing more task forces and will constantly measure results in order to refine and focus its enforcement actions.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.